

University of Liverpool and Laureate Online Education – The online and on campus student experience of the MPH programme

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The University of Liverpool is in the unique position of having a successful on-going partnership with Laureate Online Education. The Masters of Public Health (MPH) programme offered by the University of Liverpool is now available as a wholly online post graduate degree as well as the traditional on campus programme in partnership with Laureate, opening up opportunities for students around the world to access this internationally renowned programme.

THE LITERATURE

E-learning has developed rapidly due to the explosion in worldwide internet access, coupled with university requirements to widen participation, and also the economic demands for a qualified workforce. E-learning as a mode of delivery creates new challenges and often introduces greater and more complex issues in relation to culture, language, learning style and educational experience (Bartram 2007).

There are few established degree programmes that are delivered wholly or mainly via the internet and as a result there is a lack of considered reflection within the education sector as to the impact of different methods of learning delivery on the student experience with a paucity of research around adapting and delivering online materials and resources (Timmis et al. 2004).

In addition there has been little pedagogic research in higher education, limited research in post graduate education and how adults learn at this level and also, how e-learning functions as a method of delivery of adult learning (Muirhead 2007).

THE STUDY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE AND ON CAMPUS POST GRADUATE LEARNING

This study explored the learning experiences of MPH students at the University of Liverpool in the two distinctly different learning environments provided by the MPH online programme and the MPH on campus programme.

It should be stressed that the aim of the research was not to ascertain which method of delivery was most appropriate, but rather to explore the strengths and opportunities of both types of learning experience. The study also aimed to identify barriers to learning within both programmes, with the findings being used to develop innovative means of improving student experience.

The project used a qualitative, in-depth approach to explore the experience of students with individual interviews with eight students from each campus, at the start and the end of the programme, diaries throughout the period of study and an online discussion forum.

FINDINGS

There is no clear career pathway into Public Health, and therefore the students had very varied qualifications and experiences, and needs and expectations differed widely. The students were mature students over the age of 35 which is a distinctly different group to

most other university cohorts. All the participants were undertaking the programme for the purpose of professional qualification and for career progression.

The students all reported that on campus traditional style delivery would have been their first choice, however the online students had no local opportunity to study and therefore the online programme had been the only option.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POST GRADUATE MATURE LEARNER

Other than two overseas on campus students who were studying full time, the participants all had full time demanding high level jobs. Most were the main wage earner, and needed to remain in their position on the career ladder and to fund their studies themselves.

More demanding, than I expected. My work is very demanding so all the work in the evening and commuting for hours is very stressful more than I thought. We have internet at work but I am not allowed to use it for this. (Marcus)

The workload and the requirement to work full time to meet the cost of the programme was a major issue.

I find this program so costly. My friends do not believe the sacrifice I am making by commuting 80 km daily and spending my whole pay check for the next two years on this course. (Babs)

In addition to working full time, juggling family commitments was also of real concern for many students. Students in their 30's inevitably have many more commitments than their younger counterparts.

It is having a full time job with a great deal of travel and a family that is a big challenge. I need 2-3 more hours' time in my day so sleep had to go! (Gary)

LEARNING STYLES

Popular learning style theorists, Kolb (1984), Honey and Mumford (2000) and Gardener (1983), suggest adult learners have developed individual learning style preferences and learn best in the environment that meets the needs of their preferred style. They explain how adults approach learning, make sense of the learning materials and then transform that learning into a new knowledge or skill.

In this study some students showed a preference for learning from reading through information. Others preferred to hear the lesson being spoken or to be involved in a debate, whilst some preferred to be »hands on« and practice at a skill. Those students who needed to talk and listen in order to facilitate learning, found the online classroom a very challenging environment and requested spoken lectures in video or CD format whilst those preferring to learn from practice struggled with theoretical debate.

In addition, some modules lend themselves to online learning more than others. The quantitative research methods module was seen to be more »factual« whilst Health and Society required debate and discussion to make sense of the theoretical content. On campus students would have liked the opportunity to take some modules online giving them more flexibility with their study time. However a wholly online option was essential for many online students as it would not have been possible to attend any on campus sessions.

ON CAMPUS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The on campus students generally were unaware that the programme was available online. However they did not feel that they would have chosen online as a study option as they preferred the idea of »face to face« contact with other students and staff, and the structure of set days in the university which allowed them to separate work and study.

I felt that I needed to actually physically have a day where I was not here and I was at university, a set day at a set time. I already do work from home for my current job but I actually found that I was looking for the physical contact with other people as well. (Lily)

Remaining living at home and continuing with their job was an important factor for local students and there was some evidence to suggest that students considered on campus as the »real« university with higher status and value.

However, some students felt set days did not allow for flexibility if it was needed; for example when job demands meant missed tutorials, and in addition, group dynamics sometimes led to challenges within the classroom.

For those living outside Liverpool who had to travel, bad weather and train delays created extra stress for the students. The opportunity to socialise outside the classroom was also rarely taken up since all students had many demands on their time and left campus as soon as tutorials finished.

Abstract

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL UND LAUREATE ONLINE EDUCATION – ERFAHRUNGEN MIT ONLINE-LERNEN UND VOR-ORT-WEITERBILDUNG DES MPH-PROGRAMMS

Der Studiengang für öffentliche Gesundheit an der Universität Liverpool, der mit dem akademischen Grad »Master of Public Health« (MPH) abschließt, kann nun nicht nur vor Ort absolviert werden, sondern wird jetzt in Kooperation mit Laureate Online Education auch als Postgraduierten-Ausbildung zur Gänze online angeboten, wodurch Studenten weltweit Zugang zu diesem international renommierten Programm erhalten.

Bisher hat sich die pädagogische Forschung kaum mit den Erfahrungen von Teilnehmern an Postgraduierten-Lehrgängen befasst, und es gibt kaum Literatur zum Online-Lernen aus der Perspektive der Studenten.

Aus diesem Grund wurden in dieser Studie die Erfahrungen der MPH-Studenten an der Universität Liverpool in den zwei gänzlich verschiedenen Ausbildungskontexten des Online-Programms und des Programms vor Ort untersucht.

Ziel der Studie war es, die Stärken und Chancen der beiden Arten der Wissensvermittlung zu ermitteln und aufzuzeigen, welche Faktoren in beiden Programmen das Lernen behindern. In dieser qualitativen Untersuchung wurden 16 Studenten während eines ganzen Studienjahrs begleitet und nach ihren Gedanken, Gefühlen, wesentlichen Entscheidungen und Erfahrungen im jeweiligen Lernumfeld befragt.

Es wurde festgestellt, dass die MPH-Studenten einen sehr unterschiedlichen Hintergrund aufweisen und vielfältige Qualifikationen und Erfahrungen mit sich bringen, weshalb auch ihre Erwartungen und Herangehensweisen stark voneinander abweichen. Sie stehen zudem vor der zusätzlichen Herausforderung, Arbeit, Privatleben und Studium miteinander zu vereinbaren, so dass Flexibilität, Wahlmöglichkeiten und Anpassungsfähigkeit bei den Studieninhalten wesentliche Aspekte darstellen.

Darüber hinaus könnten ungenaue Vorstellungen und Annahmen hinsichtlich des Online-Lernens die Entscheidungen der potentiellen Studenten beeinflussen. So erwiesen sich zum Beispiel Bedenken über das Fehlen persönlicher Gespräche als grundlos, da die Studenten die große Bandbreite an weltweiten Kontakten sehr positiv bewerteten.

The overseas students had additional challenges of often working in a second language, particularly the accent, compounded by difficulties of being away from home and lack of family support in an unfamiliar country.

ONLINE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The opportunity to enrol throughout the year was an important factor for online students, as was remaining in their own country and continuing with their job.

I would have liked to do it locally but full time was not possible so I looked outside so I could continue working. I can use the work facilities to access the internet information. (John)

The online students appreciated the flexibility of the studying and the ability to juggle work, study and family commitments. The tutorials are asynchronous allowing students to log in at their convenience, access their classrooms when travelling with work, and to download materials to take away and study.

Juggling two young children and working full time with long distance travel as part of my job, doing the course online is a great opportunity or I couldn't have done it. (Mandy)

They discovered that the online classrooms were a benefit when they lacked confidence alongside more qualified experienced students. The online format allowed time to think about questions and prepare responses in their own time, which was considered especially important for those for whom English was not the first language.

I can go back and reread a posting; this would be lost in classroom. Everything is documented here and so I can read at my leisure (Martha)

The online students were particularly enthusiastic about the range and mix of people studying online whom they had access to, creating stimulating and varied discussions on the online forums.

I enjoy the interactions and have built up good ongoing relationships with those who are also doing the programme and I have enjoyed new people with such a mix of backgrounds, those from low income countries added much. (Lucy)

There were some disadvantages however of studying online. The discipline of self study and the recognition of demands of the programme by others was a constant challenge.

I work late into the night starting at 10pm til 5.00am depending on the demand of the class. I try to study at weekends but family time competes. (Adam)

For many in low income countries, the intermittent internet access was sometimes problematic and the module content having worldwide relevance and local relevance to all students was a challenge.

CONCLUSION

Students enrolling in Public Health programmes have a wide diversity of backgrounds, qualifications and experience and therefore have varied expectations and approaches. They have additional challenges with balancing work, life and study and therefore flexibility, options and resourcefulness of the course programme are essential.

There are perhaps inaccurate preconceptions and assumptions about online learning which impact on choices made by potential students. For example, concerns for lack of face to face contact online were proved groundless as students delighted in the variety and mix of worldwide contacts.

Online learning is still a new learning platform and further research is needed to explore the reality for students and to ensure the quality of the learning experience is maintained. ■

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